

Into Africa - Everything to know about the Henry Doorly Zoo's zoo's new African Grasslands - living - The Big Stories

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By Chris Peters / World-Herald staff writer

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AFRICAN GRASSLANDS MAP

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NEW CRITTERS IN TOWN

Some of the 22 species of African Grasslands animals are making their zoo debuts, and others are back after spending some time away.

First-timers: Impala, helmeted guinea fowl and pink-backed pelican

Back at the zoo: African elephant (at the zoo from 1966 to 2011), plains zebra (1973-1986), white-faced whistling duck (1992-2007) and African spurred tortoise (1999-2013)

Animals in one savanna setting

When you look out into the zoo's new African Grasslands exhibits, you'll see giraffes foraging for food alongside rhinos and ostriches. At a nearby watering hole, elephants will spray zebras, impalas, guinea fowl and geese. No cages. No glass panes. No fences — at least none in your line of sight. Just a lush green backdrop.

This Friday, the Henry Doorly Zoo & Aquarium will officially open its \$73 million, 28-acre African Grasslands exhibit. It's the most expensive and ambitious undertaking in the zoo's history, and it marks the first major opening in a total redesign of the zoo that will group species by their native regions of the world.

"Omaha is a shining example of where zoo exhibits are heading," said Rob Vernon, spokesman for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. "The Africa area is going to be incredible."

African Grasslands is designed to immerse visitors in a savanna landscape, a perfect canvas for the region's most recognizable animals. Zoos around the world are gravitating toward these types of exhibits, and Omaha's is one of the largest and most comprehensive of its kind, Vernon said.

Creating a sense of immersion took years of patience, flexibility and orchestration.

A look at Omaha Zoo's African Grasslands exhibit





Drawing board to reality

Highlights of the six-year buildup, from conception to unveiling:

June 2010

Zoo unveils its 15-year master plan, which includes a mock-up of the African Grasslands

March 2011

Shenga, the zoo's last African elephant, leaves for Cleveland

February 2014

Zoo CEO Dennis Pate travels to Swaziland in search of elephants

Spring 2014

The first African Grasslands departures (addax, Grevy's zebras and gazelles) leave the zoo

May 2014

Construction begins on the African Grasslands

Summer 2014

Union Pacific Railroad helps reroute the zoo's train tracks, and the old south station is demolished

May 2015

The first building in the African Grasslands, the African Lodge, opens

August 2015

The first animal exhibit, the Giraffe Herd Rooms, opens

September 2015

Pate announces the zoo will import elephants from Swaziland

March 11, 2016

Omaha's six elephants arrive

March 29

A 3,500-pound bronze mammoth sculpture, modeled after state fossil Archie, goes on display

April 6

The elephants go on display indoors

May 9

The elephants are named by donors: Warren, Lolly, Claire, Kiki, Omma and Jayei

May 10

White-faced whistling ducks and pink-backed pelicans are released into the lagoon, the first animals with full access to their African Grasslands exhibit

May 27

The African Grasslands opens in a ribbon-cutting at 10:30 a.m.

It began with a mock-up. In 2010 the zoo released its 15-year master plan, which included a tentative model for the African Grasslands.

Ground was broken for the project two years ago. Construction workers built animal storage buildings — the largest of which, for elephants, measures 29,000 square feet — and they sank those buildings into the earth, building up shrub-covered berms to hide the behemoths from view. Some were tucked away down hills or around corners. Crews painted buildings and fences brown so they'd blend in. They blended real rocks with artificial ones. They planted trees and shrubs to cover back fences, so that when visitors look out, they don't see the BNSF Railway in the distance or the administrative buildings under the aquarium — they just see the animals and plenty of green.

"If we do this all right, you don't notice that we've gone to this extra effort," said Dennis Pate, the zoo's CEO and executive director, "but you notice that the giraffes look really good."

In order to pay for the project, the zoo raised most of its \$73 million budget with private donations. In fall 2014 the Omaha Zoo Foundation started a campaign, Raise Wild, to solicit the remaining \$5 million needed for the project, offering naming rights, engraved giraffe hoof prints and more.

Donor Bill Cenovic said the project was a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to give back to the zoo."

He remembers fishing off the lagoon bridge with his grandparents as a child back when it was still Riverview Park, and he relishes the moments he has spent with his children, Jack and Claire, at the zoo, teaching them about the animals while pushing their stroller.

When the zoo started raising money for this project, Cenovic offered to help, donating enough to name an exhibit. He let Jack and Claire, 13 and 11, pick what they wanted to name; they chose the African pygmy goat kraal, or enclosure — and dad put his kids' name on it instead of his own.

"It's just a major impact for the community and for the region and for the area," Cenovic said. "The travelers and the kids that come through there can get a window into the world, it's tremendous."

Donor Dr. Stan Truhlsen (African Lodge) said he wanted to give back to one of the "prime cultural spots in the city." A monetary contribution, donor Syd Cate (Giraffe Herd Room) said, is "an expression of thanks for a community that has been so good to me."



Sun peeks through the trees near the entrance to the African Grasslands exhibit. BRENDAN SULLIVAN / THE WORLD-HERALD

WHAT'S IN, WHAT'S OUT

Since its conception, the African Grasslands exhibit has undergone many changes because of animal availability, construction costs and other reasons. Here are the highlights.

Gone from the master plan: Hippos, wild dogs, crocodiles, kudus, African Pavilion, event lawn

Planned along the way but not adopted: Warthogs, otters, elephant lagoon swim pool

Added since conception: Rock kopje, game management headquarters, children's rock kopje trail, elephant amphitheater, giraffe feeding station, impalas, bongos, pygmy goats, spurred tortoises, several bird species

The project covers a huge section of the zoo, stretching from the south end to its farthest east point.

Before construction, the area housed addax, red river hogs, bongo, giraffes, black-footed penguins, Grevy's zebras, gazelles, sable antelope, cheetahs and rhinos. The zoo moved most of those species to other zoos, places within Omaha's zoo or the Simmons Safari Park in Ashland for temporary holding during construction. It had to shift around animals to keep some, like giraffes and rhinos, at the zoo, while still building the other exhibits.

Moving those animals proved tricky.

The zoo had a young giraffe, LoLo, and didn't want to crate the animal without its mother. So it did what few zoos do: trained the giraffes to walk across the sidewalk from their old building into their new one.

It took two months, the giraffes progressing just a step or two a day down a fenced-in walkway, baited by dangling branches full of leaves. Giraffes are panicky creatures, fearful of change, but with time, they came across.

Now that construction is complete, zookeepers have had to do it all over again.

They've been training giraffes to go back across the visitor sidewalk from their overnight barn into their new yard, which they'll share with white rhinos, impalas, ostriches, spur-winged geese and white storks. This time it's moving much more quickly. The giraffes have been able to watch from the side yard in their new barn while the entire African

Grasslands has come into form, so they're more familiar with their surroundings and are less hesitant to move.



Giraffes look out as construction continues for the African Grasslands. BRENDAN SULLIVAN / THE WORLD-HERALD

PAST PROJECTS

How the African Grasslands compares to other zoo projects:

African Grasslands (2016)

\$73 million

Expedition Madagascar (2010)

\$10.5 million

Hubbard Orangutan Forest (2005)

\$8.5 million

Hubbard Gorilla Valley (2004)

\$14 million

Desert Dome (2002)

\$31.5 million

Garden of the Senses (1998)

\$1.8 million

Scott Aquarium (1995)

\$16 million

Lied Jungle (1992)

\$15 million

Durham Family Bear Canyon (1989)

\$1.4 million

Cat Complex (1977)

\$2.5 million

Keepers are training almost every animal in the African Grasslands to go into its exhibit every morning and come back to its holding barn at night — even little birds like guinea fowl.

“We’re afraid if we leave them out overnight they’re going to get picked off by hawks and owls,” Pate said. “So we’re training them to respond to a whistle so they can go back in the barn at night.”

In the African Grasslands, there will be two yards where multiple species will share a space together, just as they would in the wild. The zoo is slowly introducing those animals to one another.

Predators and prey won’t live together, but it’s still tricky getting animals comfortable with strangers.

“They don’t know if they’re going to be eaten or if everything is going to be OK, because none of these giraffe, I believe, have seen a rhinoceros before,” Pate said. “We want to show them a rhinoceros first and show them that they’re pretty easygoing.”

At first the rhinos will be isolated in an area sectioned off by electric cattle wire, just to be sure the species get gradually acquainted. Across the path, elephants will also have a separate yard, but Pate said the zoo will try to let them intermingle with zebras, impalas and guinea fowl sooner than later.



A young girl looks on at the elephants as construction continues for the African Grasslands. BRENDAN SULLIVAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Two elephants eat branches and leaves as construction continues for the African Grasslands. BRENDAN SULLIVAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

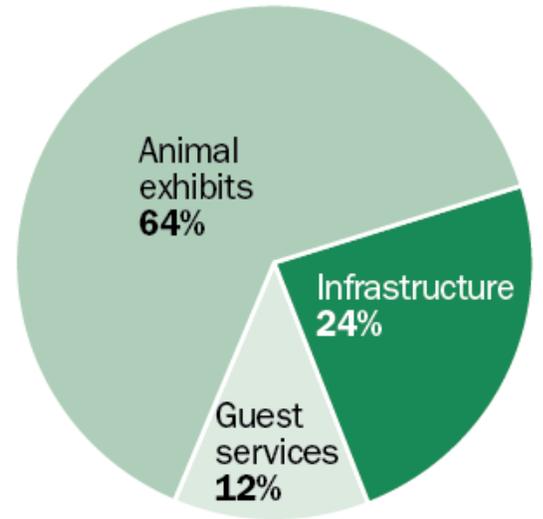
Hoofstock keeper Kelly Goodyear feeds Lolo and Dottie, right, at Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo & Aquarium. MEGAN FARMER/THE WORLD-HERALD

While construction moved forward, the zoo's curators assembled a collection of 22 species of animals for the exhibit, including several that were already at the zoo, but also some newcomers. Helmeted guinea fowl, pink-backed pelican and impala are all making their debut at the zoo, while elephants, zebras, white-face whistling ducks and African spurred tortoises are returning to the zoo after some time away.

"There's kind of a different story with (acquiring) every one," said Dan Cassidy, the zoo's general curator.

One bongo breeder promised a breeding-age bull to the zoo, then forgot about it and sold the animal to another institution. Four pink-backed pelicans are still waiting to clear quarantine. And, of course, there were the elephants, which arrived from Swaziland in March after some resistance from animal-rights groups.

HOW THE \$73 MILLION WAS SPENT



NOTE: Infrastructure includes utilities, demolition, transportation and irrigation. Guest services includes concessions, restrooms, landscaping and signs.

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"Omaha is a shining example of where zoo exhibits are heading," said Rob Vernon, spokesman for the Association

of Zoos and Aquariums. “The Africa area is going to be incredible.”

But now the collection is assembled. The exhibits are complete, and the grand opening is ready.

An official ribbon-cutting will be Friday at 10:30 a.m. This will mark the finish line of the African Grasslands, but Pate still won't say it's completely done.

In a few years the sea lions, which mark the northeast edge of the African Grasslands, will get a new exhibit of their own elsewhere in the zoo. Pate already has his eye on their pool as a spot to put another African Grasslands display.

“It could be wild dogs, could be hippos, could be another antelope species, could be crocodiles, could be a primate species, could be lots of things — it could be an aviary,” he said. “We haven't given it any thought because we're just focused on getting done what we promised we would.”

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What you'll see in the vast new exhibit

The Henry Doorly Zoo's African Grasslands brings together 22 species over 28 acres, stretching from the zoo's south end to its farthest east point.



MEERKAT

At the zoo: 1966-1967; 2001-present



ROCK HYRAX

At the zoo: Since 1999



KLIPSPRINGER

At the zoo: Since 2001



WHITE-THROATED MONITOR LIZARD

At the zoo: Since 2002



RETICULATED GIRAFFE

At the zoo: Since 1975



WHITE RHINOCEROS

At the zoo: Since 1966



WHITE STORK

At the zoo: Since 1983



SPUR-WINGED GOOSE

At the zoo: 1972-1974; 1984-present



OSTRICH

At the zoo: Since 1972



IMPALA

At the zoo: Since 2015



AFRICAN ELEPHANT

Conservation status: Vulnerable

At the zoo: 1966-2011; 2016



PLAINS ZEBRA

At the zoo: 1973-1986; 2015-present



HELMETED GUINEA FOWL

At the zoo: Since 2015



EGYPTIAN GOOSE

At the zoo: Since 1974



AFRICAN PYGMY GOAT

At the zoo: Since the 1960s



WHITE-FACED WHISTLING DUCK

At the zoo: 1992-2007; 2014-present



PINK-BACKED PELICAN

At the zoo: Since 2015



AFRICAN LION

Conservation status: Vulnerable

At the zoo: Since 1965



CHEETAH

Conservation status: Vulnerable
At the zoo: 1965-1991; 2001-present



BONGO

At the zoo: Since 2001



AFRICAN SPURRED TORTOISE

Conservation status: Vulnerable
At the zoo: 1999-2013; 2015-present



SABLE ANTELOPE

At the zoo: Since 1965